

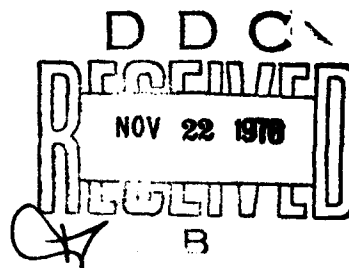
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RM-5353-1-ISA/ARPA  
SEPTEMBER 1967

THE WAR IN THE DELTA:  
VIEWS FROM THREE  
VIET CONG BATTALIONS

Melvin Gurtov



PREPARED FOR:  
THE OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY  
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AND THE  
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FOREWORD

This report is one of a series of Rand studies that examine the organization, operations, motivation, and morale of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces that fought in South Vietnam.

Between August 1964 and December 1968 The Rand Corporation conducted approximately 2400 interviews with Vietnamese who were familiar with the activities of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army. Reports of those interviews, totaling some 62,000 pages, were reviewed and released to the public in June 1972. They can be obtained from the National Technical Information Service of the Department of Commerce.

The release of the interviews has made possible the declassification and release of some of the classified Rand reports derived from them. To remain consistent with the policy followed in reviewing the interviews, information that could lead to the identification of individual interviewees was deleted, along with a few specific references to sources that remain classified. In most cases, it was necessary to drop or to change only a word or two, and in some cases, a footnote. The meaning of a sentence or the intent of the author was not altered.

The reports contain information and interpretations relating to issues that are still being debated. It should be pointed out that there was substantive disagreement among the Rand researchers involved in Vietnam research at the time, and contrary points of view with totally different implications for U.S. operations can be found in the reports. This internal debate mirrored the debate that was then current throughout the nation.

A complete list of the Rand reports that have been released to the public is contained in the bibliography that follows.

(CRC, BJ: May 1975)

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For a description of the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project and interviewing process, the reader should first consult W. Phillips Davison, *User's Guide to the Rand Interviews in Vietnam*, R-1024-ARPA, March 1972.

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PREFACE

This Memorandum is one of a series on Viet Cong motivation and morale, undertaken by The RAND Corporation for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) and the Advanced Research Projects Agency. It looks at recruitment practices, training, morale, village operations, and control devices in three regular-force Viet Cong battalions which operate in and around Dinh Tuong province in the upper delta.

Devoted mainly to conditions during 1965 and 1966, the analysis rests primarily on the comments of 39 of the battalions' former members who responded to RAND's team of interviewers in the field. Interviews supplied by the Military and National Intelligence Centers are also exploited.

Because Viet Cong military units are compartmentalized, and because the data detailed in the Introduction are inherently limited, no effort is made here to generalize the experiences and perceptions of the former military personnel in our sample, or to extend their application to other regular-force units either in the delta or elsewhere. Like other Communist military systems, the Viet Cong's is marked by the functional independence of subunits. This necessitates considerable caution in arriving at conclusions about strengths and weaknesses at battalion, regional, or corps level. The respondents' accounts of uniformly adverse and deteriorating conditions in their "units," it is felt, must be weighed against the qualities of leadership, scope and effectiveness of control, and operating procedures in

subunits before any reliable assessment can be made concerning the cohesion or lack of it in even a single large unit.

The question of VC vulnerabilities that can be exploited by U.S. and GVN persuasion is dealt with in a broader context in earlier studies, particularly RM-4699-1-ISA/ARPA and RM-4911-1-ISA/ARPA.

Parenthetical letters and numbers in the text refer to the serial numbers assigned by the author to the 39 interviewees whose responses form the basis of this study. The Appendix gives tabulated information about the background of the interviewees.



### SUMMARY

This study focuses on VC regular-force battalions 261, 263, and 514. It suggests that the fragmented structure and compartmentalization characteristic of such units, together with a pervasive control and surveillance system, may have been the main supports of cohesion in the ranks despite highly adverse developments which, under a different military system, might have prompted widespread demoralization.

As the VC concentrated their military effort on II and III Corps during 1965 and 1966, the delta units decreased their activities; but their problems multiplied. Recruitment became more difficult, in part because of manpower demands by other units but also because of a decided shift in villagers' attitudes to apathy or submerged hostility toward the VC. Training became shorter, less formalized, and oriented toward military rather than political proficiency. Yet despite these difficulties, manpower was kept at peak levels; combat effectiveness was apparently maintained, although at the cost of reduced activity; village support continued, although with far less peasant enthusiasm; the VC adopted counter-measures and proved themselves still able to exert control over the villages.

Cadres and soldiers in our sample used different standards in assessing the morale of their units. Cadres usually perceived morale not in terms of day-to-day hardships but in terms of whether or not political education had fortified the troops to the point where they were

willing to face the risk of death. Testimony on low morale within the three battalions seems to arise from feelings of discouragement and weariness rather than from any important failings of the control system. In fact, tight, effective, and omnipresent controls and surveillance, together with the absence of clear and safe alternatives to continued service, seem to have prevented demoralization and to have maintained the cohesion and efficiency of the battalions.

The fear inculcated by the control system that rallying to the GVN carried risks out of proportion to any gains helped to keep down the number of defections. Their control of the soldiers' informational world enabled the VC to make the battalions into closed societies. Although cadres and soldiers rallied for different reasons, about half the men in both groups deserted home before rallying.

U.S.-GVN psywar efforts, it is suggested, should aim primarily at breaking down the uncertainty of the VC troops about the treatment of prisoners. They should also exploit the existing anxiety over the prospect of a long war, villagers' grievances, and the VC policy of transferring troops out of the relative safety of the delta.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The considerable published material that has emerged from the VC Motivation and Morale Project contains no in-depth examination of individual units of the Viet Cong, operating within a more or less definable area. This Memorandum is the first attempt at such a study. In view of its inevitable limitations, it should not be the last.

Those limitations should be made clear at the outset. We are dealing here with three regular-force (RF) battalions, two of which are main-force units (MF) operating at the regional level and one of which is a province local-force (PLF) unit. Almost all the respondents were military personnel; the exceptions were several civilian VC cadres who worked in the provinces where the three RF battalions operated. We have excluded consideration of interviews of all guerrillas, self-defense militiamen, and local force soldiers below province level who fought in the area covered by this study (Dinh Tuong and the surrounding upper delta provinces of Kien Phong, Kien Hoa, Kien Tuong, Vinh Long, and Go Cong).

Our sample comprises interviews with 39 persons. It may be broken down by battalion and rank, as follows:

	<u>Cadres</u> <sup>*</sup>	<u>Soldiers</u>	<u>Total</u>
Bn. 261	5	8	13
Bn. 263	1	6	7
Bn. 514	<u>7</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>19</u>
Totals	13	26	39

\* Personnel with at least the rank of assistant squad leader.

Although the sample is small, it represented, at the time the study was initiated, the largest group of interviewees from units operating in a definable area, and available to the RAND team. Where the sample falls drastically short is in the distribution between ralliers and prisoners: of the 39 interviewees, 35 were ralliers. The distortions that can and do arise from so disproportionate a sampling should be kept in mind at all times. In particular one should remember the respondent's desire or felt need to demonstrate his sincerity in leaving the VC by underestimating or ignoring his unit's cohesive aspects and exaggerating the government's strengths.

Still another weakness of the sample is the short time during which many respondents were with their units. Only 6 of the 26 ordinary soldiers were with their units for a year or more. On the other hand, only 5 of the 13 cadres were with their units for less than a year. Far too many ordinary soldiers in our sample came from what are perhaps best termed the "fringe elements" of the Viet Cong. For various reasons, they left their units soon after joining. Their service was often too short for them to acquire significant information about their units.

Finally, the limited knowledge of individual soldiers about matters beyond the small sphere of their own companies constitutes a basic obstacle to an inquiry such as this one. In examining the views of the respondents, the author has been struck time and again by the impression that, as valuable as a study of individual units may be, the compartmentalized organization of the Viet Cong military machine can make irrelevant the views of all

but the highly-placed, conscientious cadres on what is going on in the battalion as a whole. As will be brought home in Section VII, the control and surveillance system of the Viet Cong, certainly in the units scrutinized here and very likely in most other RF units, has attained such scope and efficiency that the "average soldier" and even "average cadre" cannot, and should not be expected to, possess reliable knowledge about any matter beyond his immediate subunit -- squad, platoon, or company. At best the respondents in our sample were aware of their company's situation; at worst they were certain only of matters affecting their three-man cell.

The sample does not even contain two men who fought during a similar time interval with the same squad of nine to twelve men. Conclusions drawn from such inadequate data may be "correct" in terms of the limited information available but can hardly be applied to conditions in larger units.

Members of the same unit vary in background, intellect, experience, rank, and so on. Consequently, they give a variety of responses to the same question. Moreover, the interviews lacked uniformity, so that it is impossible to say whether an omission was due to the subject's ignorance or to a failure of the interviewer to ask the appropriate question.

In order to maximize the reliability and applicability of the conclusions of the study, each respondent's remarks have been weighed not only against comparable statements by comrades in the same unit, but also, to the extent possible, against his personal characteristics and situation. Heavy reliance has been placed upon comments

by cadres, whose rank and overall experience seemed to favor a far more reliable assessment of the three battalions than the character and situation of the ordinary soldiers. Every effort has been made to discern and make the most of the "hard" statements -- illustrations (rather than generalizations), and precise figures.

The study offers views on selected topics relating to the three battalions rather than a complete picture of them. It gives glimpses into the recruitment and training processes; impressions of the men's morale; implications of their interaction with villagers and operations in the villages; their involvement in the control and surveillance system; their reasons for deserting or rallying directly to the GVN; and their perceptions of the war. Where distinctions seem valid, the units are treated individually; generalizations are made where they seem warranted. What is here said about the three battalions under study should not be extrapolated to other Viet Cong military units in the south or to other units in IV Corps.

## II. THE DELTA

Before proceeding to a descriptive analysis of what our interviewees have told us, we need to know something of the area where they operated, and of the orders of battle of both the Viet Cong and the GVN forces.

### A. GEOPHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DELTA

The delta is low-lying country, with an average elevation below 50 feet. Numerous streams, canals, marshes, and swamps crisscross the area which, during the wet season (June to November), is about 70 percent inundated. Ground operations, especially when combined with vehicular movement, and air attacks are difficult during the wet season. But the flat portions of the delta do not offer the Viet Cong much concealment. As a result, the VC have usually launched their largest attacks during the monsoon season, whereas the most propitious time for GVN operations has been the dry season, which extends from November to March.

The IV Corps area, with over 5.4 million inhabitants, is the population center of South Vietnam. As the principal rice-growing region of the country, the delta is a valuable asset to the side that controls it. Particularly since 1966, with a vast increase in the refugee flow to GVN areas, the government has obtained control of most of the people, but not necessarily the territory of the delta. The VC are still able to roam at will through much of the area.



B. ORDERS OF BATTLE

VC forces operating in IV Corps consist of regular forces (RF) -- main force (MF) units up to regiment size which move either over a region of several provinces or within a single province, and local forces (LF) from platoon to battalion size which may move within a single district of or throughout a province -- and irregular forces (guerrillas, self-defense militia, and secret self-defense forces). In this study, as previously indicated, we are concerned only with the RF units, two battalions of which operate regionally (261 and 263), and one of which operates provincially (514).

The former RF members with whom this study is concerned saw action only against GVN forces. In late 1966, neither U.S. nor NVA units were operating in the area, although regroupees from the DRV occupied dominant places on the top rungs of the two MF battalions. VC activities in the region during 1965 and 1966 were generally confined to small-scale night movements, quick attacks, and acts of sabotage or terrorism. Battalion-level operations seemed to occur mainly in response to GVN-initiated attacks or sweeps, although there have been a few important exceptions. While approximately one-third of all VC-initiated incidents in South Vietnam occurred in IV Corps through mid-1966, there was apparently a considerable reduction in both the size and duration of VC attacks around the end of 1965. As will be brought out again later, ranking cadres have revealed in interviews that the Viet Cong are now content merely to hold on to the delta without, for the moment, aiming at its "liberation."

As military action shifted to the central highlands in 1965, VC units in the delta were told to expect a long war in which they would have two major responsibilities: first, to "neutralize," rather than annihilate, the enemy; second, to meet the increased manpower and supply demands of other RF battalions operating in II and III Corps, in part by reducing the scope of activities. Our three RF units clearly followed out the new tactical line: interviewees unanimously indicated that Bn. 514 (LF) did not fight a major battle during 1966, while Bns. 261 and 263 (MF), which bore the brunt of the heavy fighting between 1963 and 1965, became much more selective in their targets and sought to avoid meeting the ARVN head-on.

In the six provinces, combined VC regular forces and guerrillas were only slightly outnumbered by GVN ground forces. In late 1966, regular forces' strength was roughly 7,000 and guerrillas' about 23,000 for a total strength of 30,000. The ARVN numbered just under 18,000; with the addition of popular-force and regional-force soldiers,<sup>1</sup> total GVN strength in the six provinces was about 35,000. Since their strategy was to siphon off manpower from the delta units for duty in the central highlands, the VC had to reduce the scale of their attacks and rely more on hit-and-run tactics.

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<sup>1</sup>The increment is very approximate, being based on the then 1:1 ratio of popular-force/regional-force strength to ARVN strength throughout South Vietnam.

Air strength committed to IV Corps is not available and, in any event, frequently changes.

### III. RECRUITING FOR THE BATTALIONS

#### A. SOME GENERAL TRENDS

Since 1964, according to our interviewees, the Viet Cong units operating in the upper delta have found increasing difficulty in obtaining new recruits. The intensity of the war from the ARVN side, the fears and policies imposed by the Viet Cong upon the villages, the earnest quest of villagers for a haven beyond the immediate war zone -- these were some of the factors that turned recruitment from a process of selection into a game of pursuit. Nevertheless, the increased difficulty of the game did not alter the outcome: able to roam and regroup in the delta, the VC continued to recruit enough men to replace losses. Since their aim by 1965 was to provide manpower for II and III Corps, however, the VC clearly could not have added to their existing strength in the delta.

Almost to a man, the interviewees agreed that, until 1964, the Viet Cong were readily able to interest young men in joining. Many respondents drew a dividing line at the year 1964, after which, as it seemed to them, the selectivity that had marked the Viet Cong recruitment process declined somewhat. Thereafter the VC relied more on conscription on the spot. A heightened consciousness of the prolonged hardship and death that war could bring made youths extremely reluctant to join either side. Only under various forms of pressure could they be induced or forced to become soldiers.<sup>2</sup> In some areas, it was reported,

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<sup>2</sup>One of the officers of Bn. 514, clearly a hard-core prisoner, observed: "In 1964,

youths left their villages. But the difficulties experienced by the VC as a result of this behavior and outlook were mitigated by appropriate VC measures in the regional forces. Recognizing that young men, if service was unavoidable, much preferred to serve in the guerrilla forces, the VC seem to have adopted, in 1965, the practice of shifting guerrillas into the RF as an alternative to recruiting directly from the villages.<sup>3</sup> "The youths," said a former member of the District Party Chapter Committee of Dinh Tuong Province,

are very afraid of being away from home and this is why none of them wants to perform his military duty. Relatively speaking, it is easier for the [district and village] local force units to recruit people than for the bigger units, because

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about 90 percent of the people who joined the Front were volunteers. In 1965, about 60 or 70 percent of them were volunteers. The number of volunteers [in 1966] was as low as 30 to 50 percent...." He gave as the reason for the decline a realization by youths that neither side was safe to join. He angrily attacked "shirkers" who only want "to find a place to live where they aren't forced to join either side."

<sup>3</sup>In 1966, however, the process may have been reversed again. A Party committee member in a Dinh Tuong village observed that the VC's 1965 directive on recruitment, which called for villages, districts, and provinces to dispatch their recruits to the regional authorities for final disposition, was overturned in 1966 to permit RF units, as in 1964, to recruit directly from the villages. The respondent considered that the reason for the switch lay in "the fact that the [RF] units are under strength and that it is getting more and more difficult to draft youths; that this is why the Front has been forced to revert to the method of direct recruitment by the units." (Author's emphasis.) This study, as we shall see, disagrees with the above explanation.

youths are more willing to join the local force units since this will enable them to visit their families once in a while. If they joined larger units, especially the ones operating in eastern Nam Bo [roughly, the eastern portion of III Corps area], they would have practically no chance of going home.

As we have just noted, the VC decided sometime in late 1965 to increase the rate of integration of village guerrillas and district local-force soldiers into the main-force units. According to an assistant squad leader of Bn. 261, the VC deliberately enticed youths into joining the local units, only to remove them later for duty with the provincial or regional battalions.<sup>4</sup> As a result, permission previously granted volunteers to opt for duty with the guerrillas was revoked; a Labor Youth member and squad leader stated flatly that in 1965 "no one was permitted to stay in the village as a guerrilla." One private told how his guerrilla band was indoctrinated in May 1966 about the need to build up the main forces. Thereafter he was dispatched to Bn. 263.

While we cannot evaluate the results of this transfer policy with any precision, figures, supplied mainly by

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<sup>4</sup>This device has also been commented on by a civilian cadre who testified that his district youth group committee had "to employ ruses" to obtain men for the RF. He said, in relation to conditions in 1965:

We tell them that if they don't do their duty by joining the army, they have to do their duty by joining the guerrillas, and even in the guerrillas there has to be organization into cells and squads and so on. They will agree to this. After getting them organized we send them down some good cadres to give them continuous propaganda and gradually accustom them to discipline and, when this is done, send them up to a higher level military unit....

cadres, seem to indicate that recruits for the RF were obtained, although clearly at the expense of village and district units which could not simultaneously be replenished by hard-pressed local recruitment agencies.<sup>5</sup>

The Dinh Tuong district committee cadre cited above, while reporting difficulties in obtaining new recruits, told of having recruited 900 men in 1963, 1200 in 1964, and 1000 in the first quarter of 1965. Likewise, a village committee cadre in the same province said the district sent 1672 men and the village 78 to the province authorities in 1965, compared to 890 and 55 respectively in 1964. These and later data do not make clear whether the recruits supplied met the requests of RF unit commanders; but one gets the impression (and this is all it can be) that the numbers obtained were incompatible with the notion that, in 1965, the RF units were experiencing a desperate or critical manpower shortage. Recruitment for RF units in the delta, then and subsequently, continued at least to balance the depletion of manpower arising from battle attrition and the transfer of personnel to RF units operating in the central highlands (II and III Corps). The chief problem for the Front, it may be concluded, was not less effective recruiting for the RF, but a decline in the availability of young men for service in the villages and districts.

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<sup>5</sup>The strain upon VC village and district authorities of replacing guerrillas sent upward to larger units has been remarked upon in detail by our committee member (p. 10) and by the secretary of a Dinh Tuong village youth group chapter committee who later became a member of a similar district committee.

B. RECRUITMENT AND REINFORCEMENT IN THE DELTA UNITS

Difficult as it may be, a distinction must be made between recruitment as it affected the Dinh Tuong local force and as it affected the two regional main forces. The regional-level battalions (RMF) apparently received priority over the provincial local forces (PLF) with respect to allocation of manpower resources in the delta. Moreover, the PLF had to obtain recruits not only for itself but also for the RMF. Should we conclude that the PLF had far more serious manpower problems than the RMF? A comparison between Bn. 261, an RMF unit, and Bn. 514 of the PLF in 1965 and early 1966 suggests in a limited but useful way that VC recruitment and reinforcement depend on circumstances too numerous to allow generalizations about them.

Bn. 261 is the vital cog of the VC forces operating in the upper sectors of IV Corps. Although interviewees' estimates differ considerably, Bn. 261 did seem to be at or even above full strength (at least 500 men) through early 1966. Unlike the other main-force units under discussion, Bn. 261 then had a Northern commander, regroupees at all cadre levels down to and including the platoons, the full quota of eight companies, the highest percentage of veterans, considerable prestige among the population and other MF units, and apparently the best weapons available. Those recruits brought into the battalion, according to a platoon leader and regroupee, fought with the infantry; the heavy-weapon platoons were manned only by veterans and Party members. Bn. 261 was clearly the elite unit in the Dinh Tuong area.

In several respects the condition of Bn. 514 was less solid than that of Bn. 261. The 514th needed heavy weapons, suffered higher casualties, operated in a more restricted area, and had a higher percentage of recruits among the troops. Bn. 514 occasionally operated in conjunction with Bn. 261 in Dinh Tuong Province. Interviewees from the former unit have commented that it was far inferior to Bn. 261 in quality of personnel, weaponry, prestige, and even courage.

Until very roughly mid-1965, Bn. 514 was able steadily to build up strength. Former members have uniformly recalled that their outfit began as a single platoon in mid-1961, grew to three companies within two years, and added two more during 1964 and 1965 to raise its strength to approximately 400 men. It is significant that, whereas total strength did not increase in 1966, neither did it decrease despite the debilitating effects of defeats and the manpower priority given the RMF. An assistant squad leader commented that getting replacements necessitated writing four or five applications to the commander. Yet a platoon leader testified that the battalion still managed to obtain reinforcements within only three days by forwarding to the Province Committee's Military Affairs Section an estimate of casualties for forthcoming battles. Respondents from the same unit, even the same individual, have given different slants on the same problem, thereby reflecting the influences of circumstance and position in the battalion command structure. The conflicting evidence leads to the conclusion that recruitment and reinforcement were weightier problems for the PLF than for the RMF; that



these difficulties, however, were not serious enough to reduce the highest level of strength reached by either force; and that their major effect was not a deterioration of the combat effectiveness of the PLF but a reduction of its activity in conformity with the general strategic refocusing, since 1965, on a build-up in the central high-lands.

#### IV. EXPERIENCES OF THE NEW RECRUITS

In any Communist military system, training has always meant more than the preparation of a man for service at the front. Training aims not merely at military readiness but also at the inculcation of political values through careful indoctrination based on the principle of "coercive persuasion." The inductee must be made aware of the Front's political aims, of the enemy's military and political weaknesses, of the inherent strengths of the apparatus he has joined, and of the inevitable triumph to come that will bring benefits and glory to the nation, the army, and himself.

In keeping with this ideal, the Viet Cong have based the training program for recruits upon military preparedness, political indoctrination, and, for some new members, "cultural" advancement.<sup>6</sup> The weight given each category seems to have depended as much on the capabilities of the group being trained as on the Front's need for manpower or specialists at the time. If new recruits were deemed politically receptive, at least half the training program consisted of historical and programmatic lectures; otherwise military training took precedence even though political indoctrination might, under less pressing circumstances, have seemed indispensable. Although few respondents were

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<sup>6</sup>By "cultural" is meant the training of educationally backward recruits in such subjects as mathematics, reading, and writing, and also of recruits believed suitable for specialized work in, for example, communications and electrical repairs.

asked, or chose, to distinguish clearly between or among the kinds of training received, the impression gained is that, in the past year (1966) military training began to take priority over political training. It appears that the VC, pressed by manpower demands, decided to de-emphasize political indoctrination during initial training in favor of greater reliance on kiem thao sessions<sup>7</sup> and between-battle lectures. Thus the requisite political conviction would be instilled after the recruit reached his unit. It seems evident that the formalized training period, at certain times and for certain units (depending upon circumstances at the moment), was eliminated entirely and that it was replaced by a less formal kind of training in the RF unit. There is, however, no firm evidence for 1966 that training in the combat unit substantially replaced formalized training in delta units.

It is interesting to observe some of the controls that have been imposed by the VC command to ensure the success and cohesiveness of the program at the outset. First, volunteers and uncoerced draftees were set apart from other new recruits. In earlier and better days, both types were normally in a position to obtain assignment to guerrilla units in or near their villages. Manpower needs apparently eliminated that option, but still made it possible for volunteers to enjoy greater freedom of movement, during training and in the RF unit, than "unenlightened" desertion-prone draftees. Recruits were further subdivided according to their home villages, so as to prevent contacts

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<sup>7</sup> Kiem-thao, in Viet Cong usage, derives directly from the Chinese Communists' chien-t'ao, short for "investigation and discussion."

among friends who might be tempted to desert together. In keeping with the highly effective totalitarian technique of isolation, the VC saw to it that recruits from the same village or hamlet went neither to the same training unit nor to the same RF company.

Yet another control device was the distance of the training site from the recruit's village and from any GVN posts. The march from home to the site might take several days and so afford opportunities for desertion (most desertions seem to have occurred during the march),<sup>8</sup> but after encampment, the distance from home and the unfamiliar surroundings tended to facilitate VC control.

Once arrived, the new recruits came into contact with still other devices designed to diminish, if not eliminate, the chances for deserting home. A number of interviewees stated that the VC posted sentries around the training camp, had "heart-to-heart" talks with those recruits believed in need of them, "discouraged" visits by family members, held kiem thao (criticism) sessions to bolster confidence and determine commitment, and sometimes maintained a cell structure (apparently not in every training group). MF and PLF battalions had separate recruit

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<sup>8</sup>One acting company commander said it was the Front's belief that deserters on the march to the training site should not be brought back because they were likely to desert again. Instead, the Front alerted local guerrillas and sought to enlist the deserters in guerrilla units.

camps,<sup>9</sup> and the application of all these devices may have varied from one type camp to another.

The impression of thoroughgoing controls over new recruits should not be exaggerated. The training period, in comparison with the period of active duty in the RF unit, was marked by freedom and persuasion rather than control through coercion. As indicated above, the only kind of outright "coercive" control during training was that maintained by the armed guards stationed about the training site. Opportunities for contacts among recruits, particularly volunteers, were much greater than subsequently. There seems to have been, for example, a much broader opportunity for trainees to interact: to discuss their situation among themselves and even to bring complaints before their superior officers. It seems reasonable to infer from the experiences of formally trained recruits that the VC command, recognizing that severely repressive controls during training could be highly counterproductive (especially when another march had to take place after training to deliver the recruit to his RF unit), permitted a measure of interaction, and adaptation, perhaps compensating for the recruit's sudden loss of familial surroundings by introducing him to other new soldiers with whom he would share the rigors of army life.

The process of controlling the unconvinced, directing the believers, and remolding the apathetic cannot be

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<sup>9</sup>Each battalion, or conceivably each regiment, also operated a detention center (referred to by one respondent as a Thought Reform Center) for escapees from the training unit.

reduced to a simple formula. For one thing, the pressures of war apparently shortened the training period, where formalized, from a few months to weeks or even days. A commanding officer of one of the battalions' training camps in Dinh Tuong Providence contrasted the training ("study session") period of 1-2 months during 1964 and 1965 with the fixed schedule of eight days that "the situation" imposed on him in 1966. Basic military tactics had to be sacrificed, he complained, because only the most cursory program could be undertaken.

We do not know how far the officer's position reflected that of others responsible for training recruits. What does seem fairly certain is that political training for most of the units in question was subordinated to military training. At least through the first half of 1966, indoctrination yielded to establishing battlefield proficiency among new recruits. The priority given to war skills was reflected in the ignorance of interviewees, including cadres,<sup>10</sup> about political matters. While the practical consequences of reduced attention to ideological matters cannot be readily determined, this change of emphasis may reflect a growing sense of urgency within the Front about its heavier military responsibilities and about the broadening of the war outside the delta.

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<sup>10</sup>Not one soldier, and few cadres, could repeat more than one or two of the ten oaths, twelve disciplinary rules, and fifteen regulations on the preservation of secrecy which trainees were required to remember.

## V. VILLAGES AND VILLAGERS

The declining availability of young men for induction into the Front forces is a direct consequence of the war's impact on the delta villages. By relying more heavily since 1964 on air power and artillery, the ARVN has made life barely tolerable in a considerable portion of the upper delta, particularly in Dinh Tuong Province. Peasants, it may be presumed, have been caught between the traditional ties to their homes and fields and their uncertainty as to how long they may safely remain before their hamlet becomes a military background. The Viet Cong have felt the effects of this uncertainty and, we may infer from the interviews, have been anxious about the flow of villagers into GVN-controlled areas. For while the heavy migration of war-weary villagers into relatively secure towns and cities has created a major refugee problem for the GVN, it has also drained villages of the people who, in the past, supplied the VC with food, lodging, supplies, and intelligence. The extent to which the emptying of villages has affected the VC, and the policies the VC have adopted to meet the situation, are the subjects of this section.

A distinction must again be drawn between the experiences of the two types of VC regular forces. The regional battalions, by virtue of their ability to provide security for the villages they entered, evidently acquired considerably more respect than the weaker, less prestigious provincial units. A member of a Dinh Tuong village Party committee, for instance, spoke in November

1966 of the contempt villagers felt for Bn. 514, contempt which they revealed by refusing to sell its soldiers food. It is also probable that the presence of the PLF, whose units are confined to one province for most operations and must therefore camp more frequently than the RMF in the same villages, has become a nuisance to villagers tired of having to provide them with food and shelter. Although it has not been possible to evaluate the amount of cooperation or hostility manifested by villagers in VC-controlled areas toward the PLF and RMF, differences of attitude exist, and these should be kept in mind.

Our respondents were substantially in agreement that the spirit of welcome and cooperation that had characterized the villagers' attitude toward MF units began to vanish in 1964. In place of that spirit arose a primary concern for security of home and family. This change was more marked in hard-hit "liberated" areas than in contested areas. A squad leader of the 261st battalion accounted for the change by postulating the existence of two classes of people, those without sons in the VC and fearful of attack, who formed the "security-minded" portion of the population and refused to cooperate with the VC, and those with sons in the Front, who were inclined to cooperate. The real situation, however, has not been so simple.

What apparently developed during 1965 and 1966 was a growing reluctance of villagers to cooperate fully with VC troops. Main-force units were accused of attracting GVN air raids and artillery fire by their



presence, of digging up trees, and of dirtying homes they used for lodging. Fearing attack, villagers no longer feasted the troops but instead sold them food, no longer offered their homes but grudgingly yielded a portion of them for the bivouac. In several instances reported by our respondents, villagers went into underground shelters or fled to their rice fields whenever the units approached. If the village actually came under attack, the older members of each family were often packed off to secure areas.

The depopulation tendency in certain delta areas does not seem as yet to have significantly impaired the fighting efficiency of the RF units. Even when a family made the difficult decision to vacate its home, the effect on the village's or hamlet's capacity to feed VC troops was usually minimal. The measures taken to force people to remain in their villages were often successful. The Front made clear, according to a well-informed deputy company commander, that persons leaving their land subjected it to redistribution. Sometimes a few members of the household were left behind to tend the fields, while in other cases the VC found no lack of families ready to take over plots that were abandoned entirely. A more severe Front policy of 1966 was designed for "holding back the people and the wealth" and incorporated not only the threat of land redistribution but actual attempts at population control: it denied inhabitants of VC-occupied villages in contested or Front-controlled areas the opportunity to leave their homes or to enter the market lest they reveal the VC's presence

Unless the situation has changed recently, the villagers in general are still extremely reluctant, despite oppressive Front taxation, vulnerability to the draft, and GVN attacks, to forsake their sacred family grounds for the uncertainties of life somewhere else. The people's attitude may have shifted in recent years to apathy or outright hostility, but no former VC reported that his unit had ever been requested to leave a village it had entered.

Aside from their policy of containing the villagers, VC delta units struck upon other devices to minimize the effects of peasant movement on the units' overall efficiency. One was a new food procurement system, introduced in 1966 and evidently intended for units operating in GVN-controlled areas. During 1965, we are told by an assistant squad leader of Bn. 514, the battalion increased the daily food allowance of each soldier from VN\$6 to VN\$10, only to find that there were not enough people around from whom to buy the food. The following year, therefore, the quartermaster was put in charge of food (mainly rice) purchases for the entire unit. He was responsible for buying from people visiting a market<sup>11</sup> and reselling the food to the troops, who received an additional VN\$2 for individual purchases of nonstaples. A second measure, designed to prevent entry into a hostile village, was to dispatch the unit's reconnaissance squad to determine, one day in advance of the battalion's arrival,

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<sup>11</sup>Where previously every populous area was a VC food depot, late in 1965 Bn. 261 found it necessary to establish quartermaster depots in which three days' provisions could be stored.

how villagers would respond to the Front's presence, which houses would be available for bivouac, and what the local terrain was.

A vital question, difficult to answer for soldiers who saw and heard only what went on in their immediate vicinity, is: Whom have the villagers blamed when their village has been damaged and people killed? A second, related question is: What effect has their attitude had on the RF units under study? The impression of the author is that no simple explanation of villagers' reactions to attacks will suffice. VC propaganda apparently convinced villagers that Americans piloted the planes which wantonly destroyed hamlets, damaged crops, and killed innocent civilians. But villagers also seem to have been perceptive enough to realize that the Front forces, by negligence or because of spies in their midst, attracted ARVN fire or air raids that would otherwise never have occurred.<sup>12</sup> Circumstances of the moment, such as the prestige, deportment, and strength of the VC unit in the village at the time of the attack, and the military situation (GVN, VC, or contested) of the village, probably weighed heavily

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<sup>12</sup>There is some evidence to suggest that villagers' awareness of VC responsibility for attacks has increased over time. A member of a Dinh Tuong village Party education and training section described the villagers' shift in attitude toward the VC this way:

In 1964, they [the villagers] were most resentful against the GVN for shelling the hamlet. But in the course of time, they became more inclined to think that their hamlet got shelled because the VC were camping in it. Although the main-force battalions never came into Ap Thoi, the hamlet has always been visited by the Front's civilian organizations, local-force units [Bn. 514] and

in determining how villagers allocated blame and what action they took. But by and large, the villagers' overriding interest in security, brought out in the discussion of recruitment, took precedence over such short-run factors as blame, hatred, and noncooperation. Wherever Viet Cong regular-force units were able to exert control, most villagers continued to cooperate with them, however unenthusiastically.

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demolition teams. This year [1966], the Ap Thoi villagers started to tell them openly that their presence in the hamlet had brought about shellings and hardships.

VI. THE BATTALIONS AT WAR: THE QUESTION OF MORALE

No element in the study of perceived trends in the Viet Cong has received more attention and less definition than that elusive intangible, morale. Few if any efforts have been made to determine what morale is, not in terms of our perception as to what morale should be, but in terms of what our captives intend or imply when they use the word "morale." If we recognize that the standard of morale differs not only as between the Viet Cong forces and Western armies but also as between cadres and ordinary soldiers within the VC, we may be in a better position to assess objectively, or at least less subjectively, the quality of morale among the regular-force units of the upper delta.

The present study does not seem the proper place for a discourse on the differing meanings of morale in different armies. For now, we wish to focus on another, although by no means more important, aspect of the morale problem -- the differing conceptions of morale held by cadres and privates. It is the strong impression of the author that, in the mind of the cadre, morale is a state of mind that reflects the degree to which general Front political aims have been absorbed and military demands and goals fulfilled by the Viet Cong soldier. More specifically, a cadre generally judges his unit's morale on the basis of the troops' firm ideological commitment (their "enlightenment"), courage in battle, eagerness to fight, and dedication to Party, army, and nation. All of these criteria subsumed under the slogan "live in greatness, die in glory," boil down to

the question: Do the soldiers conduct themselves as if fear of death was their main consideration, or do they behave as if their political education had fortified them against the risk of death? In the Viet Cong military the "correct" view is: When a revolutionary fully comprehends the meaning of the struggle in which he is engaged, his willingness to sacrifice transcends his fear of death.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the cadre, the ordinary soldier measures morale by individual, not collective, criteria. For him, morale is a state of mind that reflects the soldier's degree of adaptation to the circumstances of army life. The vital aspect of his service is not, it appears, the necessity of sacrifice for the sake of large abstractions; rather, he judges the morale of his comrades by their endurance of prolonged marches, and of the hardships of a long-term struggle; by their capacity to withstand attack without "breaking," and their moral fortitude in remaining away from home and family for lengthy periods. Here and there the criteria for cadres and soldiers overlap. The salient differences are, first, that the cadre, as we noted above, tends to view morale from the collective standpoint whereas the soldier describes morale in individual terms and, second, that the cadre's standards for morale, by the

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<sup>13</sup>A Bn. 514 acting company commander commented, in typical fashion, on the close connection between low morale and fear of death. Remarking "the morale of the new recruits this year [1966] is quite low," he went on to explain that while their comprehension of "the revolution" was high, "their morale isn't as good. Most of them are afraid of getting killed. Their morale is weak."

very nature of his training, position, and conceptions, are far higher than those of the soldier. In our interviews, for example, when a cadre states that unit morale is "low," he is speaking as one whose own morale is the standard set for those he leads.

Pursuing this distinction between the ordinary soldier and the cadre with respect to morale, let us consider the determinants of morale in both groups. Regardless of unit, the soldier interviewees consistently reported their discouragement at the hardships they endured while in the VC. They rarely stayed more than three days in any one spot and had to undertake frequent, sometimes lengthy marches without sufficient rest. They complained about insufficient food, inability to obtain home leave, inadequate medical attention and supplies, and, most frequently, the terror of increasingly intense air and artillery attacks. They disliked kiem thao. They spoke of their disappointment at the apathetic, sometimes hostile attitude of villagers whom they had expected to welcome them, feed and house them, and provide them with supplies, as well as intelligence about ARVN movements.

The cadres who were interviewed, although themselves apparently not demoralized by these hardships,<sup>14</sup> expressed

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<sup>14</sup>As will be discussed in detail in Section VII, the cadres in our sample rarely rallied because of war-related disaffection. Cadres, in fact, may be more disturbed by the lack of fighting. A private in Bn. 263 reported in July 1966: "My squad was composed of seven guys including the squad leader and assistant leader. I knew for sure that the four privates and myself did not want to fight. But the squad leader and his assistant seemed to be still willing to fight. I happened to listen to them chatting and the squad leader complained he felt rather sad because the battalion had not fought for a long time."

considerable dismay at the trend they saw among their men toward lower morale. An assistant squad leader of Bn. 514 (C-11), who rallied in June 1966, said:

In 1962 and 1963, the morale of the fighters was high in spite of the fact that the troop strength of the battalion was low -- only two companies. Because the GVN didn't resort to bombings and shellings often, the fighters weren't afraid of fighting....

Starting in 1964, the morale of the troops began to slip. It was about 20 per cent lower than the morale in the previous years. In 1965, the morale of the troops was about 60 per cent of what it had been before. It slipped even further in 1966, and compared with the morale in 1962 and 1963, it was about half as high....

This cadre, like another (a regroupee platoon leader) in Bn. 261, pinned the blame for the decline in morale on the increased numbers of new recruits, primarily draftees, in the unit. Typically, cadres took the view that the recruits were reluctant to fight and that, under the impact of intensified GVN bombardments and shellings, they deserted in 1965 and 1966 at a much higher rate than in previous years. One squad leader of Bn. 261 mentioned a contest, run by the squads of the fifth platoon about September 1965, to determine which could obtain the lowest defection rate. Malingering evidently also increased in the same period as more men than usual are said to have feigned illness rather than undertake dangerous assignments or go on ordinary operations.

All these "dislikes" of a soldier's life in the VC, as well as the resultant higher incidences of desertion and malingering, have been described in previous studies,



and in greater detail. The salient question here is whether or not dislikes and their consequences evidence deep-seated, widespread demoralization of a kind that could be operationally manipulatable. It stands to reason that a soldier will be disturbed, perhaps even profoundly discouraged, by the hardships he must endure daily over a prolonged period. That discouragement may vary depending on whether he is attached to a provincial or a regional force, or to a local rather than a main force. But discouragement must not be equated with demoralization or with loss of military effectiveness. What the ordinary soldier in our sample saw as discouragement and the cadre as unwillingness to risk death cannot yet be interpreted as a trend toward demoralization. The 1966 statistics on desertion, defection, and malingering provided us by the men in our sample were high in comparison with previous years but not in relation to total unit or subunit strength. Many respondents stated, or strongly intimated, their and their comrades' willingness to carry on in the face of hardships and suffering. They attributed this not only to harsh discipline and rigid controls,<sup>15</sup> but also to the absence of credible alternatives to "sticking it out."

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<sup>15</sup> A platoon leader of Bn. 514 who rallied late in 1966 commented on the considerable extent to which unit morale had slipped as a consequence of consecutive defeats. For the first time, he noted by way of illustration, some of the men complained that having served the "revolution" brought no benefits to their families. Asked why the men continued to fight under such circumstances, he replied:

They continued to fight with determination because they were forced to do so. In the Front's battalions, the privates always live under constant pressure which is

Furthermore, even if we knew that the bulk of the recruits now with RF units were deeply discouraged by their experiences in war, it is highly doubtful that we would be justified in drawing any conclusions about the effectiveness of those recruits. The high standards set by the cadres seem to indicate that they required of their troops not simply efficiency but the kind of enthusiasm that inspires self-sacrifice. A high-ranking cadre of Bn. 514 concluded that the morale of the new recruits under him was "quite low" because, while they were admittedly "doing their military duty," they had not "exactly put their whole mind and effort on what they were doing." The evidence from our three battalions suggests that, to a cadre, "low morale" usually meant a diminution of fighting zeal, of enthusiasm for work, or of the spirit of self-sacrifice, rather than a breakdown of the capacity to fight, to work effectively, or to carry out orders.

That "morale," interpreted in differing ways by the soldier and the cadre, does not seem, in 1966, to have been an insurmountable problem for the VC delta battalions may well be due to the effective, cohesion-inducing work

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maintained through the three-man cell system. They control one another and therefore each man is always watched over by the two other men in the cell....At the front line, even under enemy fire, you are also watched over constantly. If you don't fight well, your comrades in the cell will notice it and you will be criticized violently in kiem thao sessions....

of the subunit (squad and platoon) cadres. Their ability to carry out orders in the face of adversities determined, to a far greater extent than the views of the individual soldiers, whether or not their units were functioning fighting machines.

Putting aside the vital question of why cadres were seemingly able to fulfill their commitments, we proceed here to investigate the related subject of VC control mechanisms which, being the responsibility of cadres, played a substantial role in arresting demoralization and solidifying the unit.

## VII. CONTROLS, SURVEILLANCE, AND COHESION

The pervasive and highly effective control system in the RF units under discussion, operating through, on, and above the cadres, seems to have been the most important cause of the durability of those units in the face of mounting obstacles during 1965 and 1966. To an extent equal to and in certain respects beyond the networks in other Communist armies, the Viet Cong have instituted control and surveillance that, in effect, make each battalion a coordinated whole only during battle.

A brief description of the organization of one of the three battalions (Bn. 514) will afford a representative picture of the autonomy that characterizes the VC RF unit. As of the spring of 1965, Bn. 514 comprised five fighting companies, a guard unit of company size for control of supply routes, a self-defense company to protect the Dinh Tuong Province Party Chapter Committee (to which the battalion is directly responsible), and a special disciplinary company. Leaving aside the three specialized units, four of the five regular companies consisted of three platoons each (the fifth company, a combat or heavy weapons support unit, had two platoons); all the companies were organized on the basis of three squads per platoon and three cells per squad. Thus, Bn. 514 was structurally an integration of one hundred twenty-six cells.

The omnipresence of control becomes plainer with an appreciation of the high proportion of cadres to soldiers. Unlike the Chinese Communist PLA of World War II days, a

Viet Cong cadre is considered to be any soldier or civilian with the rank of assistant squad leader (or its equivalent) or above. In Bn. 514 there were two military leaders in every unit from squad level upwards and, in addition, two political cadres overseeing their military counterparts from platoon level on up.<sup>16</sup> The distribution of cadres in the five regular companies was therefore about as follows:

<u>Unit</u>	<u>No. of Units</u>	<u>Mil. Cadres</u>	<u>Polit. Cadres</u>
Squad	39	78	--
Platoon	14	28	28
Company	5	10	10
Battalion	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>
Totals		119	40

If we regard only the squad and platoon levels as closely bearing on the issue of control of manpower, we find that there was 1 cadre for every 2.6 soldiers.<sup>17</sup> There is no reason to believe either that this ratio has changed since the spring of 1965, or that it is significantly different in the two main-force battalions.

The ordinary soldier, in 1966, especially if he was a new recruit, must very quickly have become aware of the dangers of any outward expression of dissatisfaction. If

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<sup>16</sup>In regional main-force units such as Bns. 261 and 263, political cadres need not be present at platoon level.

<sup>17</sup>Based on 9-men squads, or 351 men to 134 cadres. At the time of China's War of Resistance against Japan, the PLA ratio of cadres to soldiers at the squad and platoon levels was slightly higher than 1.6. See Tables 1 and 2 in the appendix of Brig. Gen. Samuel B. Griffith's Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare (Praeger, New York, 1961).

assigned to a regional MF unit, he discovered upon arrival that those comrades whose friendship he might have cultivated during training or whom he already knew as village or hamlet companions had been separated out and assigned elsewhere. He was abruptly faced with the fact that he was alone among strangers, an astonishingly high proportion of whom were his superiors. His isolation was maintained within the cell he shared with two, sometimes five others. If his cell was not headed by the assistant squad leader, it might be in the charge of a trusted Party member (non-cadre), a Party probate, a Labor Youth or a veteran fighter.<sup>18</sup> The cell operated as an organic whole, eating, sleeping, moving, and fighting together. Still more important, its members talked together. In Bn. 514, whose control system has been more completely described in our data than those of the other battalions,<sup>19</sup> each cell met for ten to fifteen minutes daily to engage in criticism, self-criticism, or perhaps idle chatter if the leader was so disposed. If the unit had just returned from battle, further kiem thao sessions could be expected at the squad and platoon levels, after company- or battalion-level meetings to recapitulate the action and correct shortcomings. Although any particular day's topic naturally depended on the unit's activities and orders from the Province Party Committee, certain themes were incessantly

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<sup>18</sup>In Bn. 514, the assistant squad leader headed a six-man cell; the two other cells, with three men each, were under trusted noncadres.

<sup>19</sup>It would seem that our reconstruction (which follows) for Bn. 514 was generally descriptive of the other battalions, although certainly not every device mentioned can be assumed to have been applied in each.

pounded home. Through the familiar device of confession of sins and exposure of weaknesses, kiem thao afforded the participants an opportunity for mutual reinforcement of confidence, "enlightenment" concerning errors, and acquisition of inner strength to tackle coming hardships. The meetings, at whatever level, aimed not at obscuring the tribulations of life in the Front but at building up inner endurance to face and overcome them. By demanding the participation of all, the leadership ensured that this essentially therapeutic process would affect even the many who found it humiliating and boring. An interesting finding is that while the vast majority of all the respondents voiced their dislike of kiem thao, only one or two considered it ineffective.

The widespread use of the cell system and kiem thao has made the VC battalion into a complex molecule whose many atoms join together only for the march and the battle. Even squads sometimes moved and camped independently. A cell leader and private of the 514th said his squad had virtually no contact with the other squads except during operations. "The privates," he recalled, "only knew what had happened in their squad. Even if other squads suffered casualties, they did not know anything about them. If there were deaths, the squad secretly bought coffins and buried the dead in private." At another point, he added: "In my squad, we knew only what the higher-ranking officers wanted to let us know." Moreover, squad autonomy was reinforced by sharp restrictions on interunit visits. Leaving one subunit for another, which occurred infrequently, could only be undertaken by special permission. An assistant squad leader of Bn. 514,

said:

Whenever we left our squad to visit another squad in the same platoon, we had to report to the cell leaders. If we left our platoon to visit another platoon we had to report to the Squad Leader. If we wanted to visit another company we had to report to the Platoon Leader....

Departing the unit to visit villagers or to go home on leave was also carefully regulated. The same interviewee commented that the permission of the company commander had to be obtained if a soldier wished to go into the village or to visit with his family when the unit was stationed in the vicinity of home. If permission was granted, a three-hour time limit was imposed. In theory, it was said: home leave for ordinary soldiers amounted to fifteen days per year and, during 1966, leave could be claimed at six-month intervals. Labor Youth members were permitted to go home only once a year and Party members at even longer intervals, apparently to demonstrate their exemplary inner fortitude. The consensus of the respondents, however, was that in practice, under the best conditions, no soldier got home more than once a year.

In the confinement of the squad, every soldier knew not only that he was obligated to confess some wrongdoing but also that his every action was subject to surveillance by veteran comrades. An assistant squad leader in Bn. 514, observed that "among every group of five persons, [there were] two veterans who were entrusted with the mission of keeping an eye on the new recruits." (C-8) And an assistant squad leader in the same company similarly found that "in each squad there were a number of key Party members. If



anyone made a slip of the tongue he would be reported right away and taken to the security agency...."

Party "spies" were identifiable by the other squad members because of their periodic absence for chapter meetings. Non-Party interviewees, however, knew little else about them. Subjects generally possessed scanty information about members of their own squad other than those in their cell. Most of our respondents could offer little beyond names, approximate ages, and personalities. Knowledge about battalion and higher level personnel was even more limited. As revealed by an acting company commander, secrecy -- keeping hidden as far as possible the identities of important battalion functionaries and Party members -- was a principal tool of the security system. Speaking of the high-echelon officers, he said:

Secrecy is one of the weapons of the Front. In the Front, you don't know the names of the people in the high echelons and you don't know what function this or that person performs. In the Front when a person passes by you you don't know whether he is a cadre or a simple fighter....

While the control system is impressive, the Front evidently believes that it should be supplemented at regular intervals by relatively brief but comprehensive indoctrination courses. Apparently once a year, a reorientation campaign is carried out within the MF battalions at a predetermined location. In March 1965, according to a company clerk of BN. 514, a one-month sequence of courses for all cadres and privates re-emphasized such topics as Vietnamese history and geography, the weakening of the GVN and United States, Front directives to push forward the revolution by fighting more fiercely, the

movement for mutual affection "respect-the-cadres, love-the-privates," and observance of Ho Chi Minh's rules governing luxurious living, abstinence from drink, etc. In June 1966 another all-unit reorientation meeting was held, this time for only five days. Chaired and instructed by the battalion commander, the 514th studied the Front's 1966 resolutions, the general situation in the south, and the unit's responsibilities.

How each soldier acted, after all he heard and was told, was minutely recorded by the company or battalion clerk and dealt with accordingly. While we have as yet no data on the system of rewards and punishments that must have accompanied the control and surveillance network in Bn. 514, we do have a rather complete account for a similar unit, Bn. 516 of Kien Hoa Province. A private has told of the book kept for each soldier in which were recorded his good and bad deeds. Each month the company selected one outstanding soldier and gave him a prize. At other times, rewards ranging from praise to a decoration in one of five classes were bestowed. Punishments varied according to the seriousness of the error (failure to carry out orders was less serious than "arousing the people's anger" or making indecent approaches to women). Judging from the private's account, which is largely corroborated by brief comments from other respondents, the VC tended to be rather lenient. In keeping with the general spirit of the entire control system, punishments aimed at reform rather than coercion and submission, except in extraordinary circumstances, such as repeated violations of Party or military rules. Like the Chinese Communist Army during the anti-Japanese war, the Viet Cong

always kept coercion just below the surface. They preferred to induce cooperation through psychologically persuasive techniques and threats, and to date they appear to have succeeded admirably in maintaining discipline, except among the most thoroughly demoralized elements. One is justified in concluding that so long as the Viet Cong are able to maintain the physical and mental isolation of units at all levels down to that of the squads and cells, the cohesion of their battalions will prove exceedingly difficult to disrupt, because the disgruntled can find little or no opportunity for collusion or conspiracy.

### VIII. DESERTING AND DEFECTING

The purpose of the control and surveillance system is not limited to atomizing inter-troop or inter-unit relations. By constant repetition, through control devices of varying subtlety, of the theme that escape is both dangerous and unwise, and that final victory belongs to the Front, the system acts also as a check to desertion and defection. The fact that fewer than half of the Viet Cong soldiers and cadres in our sample rallied directly from their units to the GVN (17 of 39) suggests the possibility that VC propaganda was effective in curbing direct rallies even when it failed to check desertion.

Soldiers in the RF units under study were early made aware that escape involved risks to themselves (and sometimes their families) out of proportion to the gains proclaimed in GVN appeals. First, they were warned time and again that ill-treatment would certainly -- and death possibly -- befall them in the hands of the GVN. Although most of our respondents at one time or another had access to GVN appeals, for example by listening to airplane broadcasts or by failing to destroy Chieu Hoi literature in accordance with instructions, only three (all ordinary soldiers) included government propaganda among the reasons they gave for having rallied. For the most part, they had placed little faith in what the GVN said because of a strong feeling, born in part of VC-inculcated fear, that GVN appeals were not reliable. Faced with the contradiction between GVN promises of good treatment and VC assurances of foul play, the escape-minded soldier was

prone to rely on considerations other than Chieu Hoi appeals -- such as assurances of GVN good intentions from people he could trust -- before deciding whether to desert or defect.

To discourage desertions the RF units also employed the veiled threat. A secondary function of the reconnaissance squad of Bn. 514 was to patrol the bivouac area at night, as much to guard against escapes as to prevent surprise attack. In other units, double sentries were posted whenever a new recruit had to stand guard. Moreover, soldiers were aware that, even if they managed to get by the guards, they might still have to contend with local guerrillas. There was always uncertainty, which bred fear, about the punishment that awaited anyone caught in attempted desertion.<sup>20</sup>

Viet Cong RF units reinforced these constraints with propaganda. By closing off access to non-Communist news media, soldiers were forced to listen to, or read, reports that spoke only of VC victories and high enemy losses. Although ordinary soldiers sometimes were permitted to possess their own radios, the programs they could tune in were confined to news from Radio Peking or Radio Hanoi. Some soldiers eventually realized that they were being fed lies, usually when a report claimed for their own unit

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<sup>20</sup> As some ralliers discovered, a man's escape led the leader of his former unit to institute special kiem thao sessions -- discussions of the desertion -- aimed at any friends harboring similar plans. If the rallier was a ranking cadre, it would be especially important to keep close watch on the rallier's comrades. This intense surveillance, however, may have led individuals to consider escape out of resentment over their leaders' sudden mistrust.

a victory in battle that they knew to have been a defeat. Generally, however, by isolating soldiers through rigid controls on interaction and by keeping them in the dark about exact losses and the identities of the dead in other squads,<sup>21</sup> RF leaders were at least able to exploit the system of fragmented units to cloud defeats and exaggerate victories.

Our sample, small though it is, does reveal some interesting aspects of the defection question. Among the 24 soldiers who rallied, 13 spent some time at home before giving themselves up ("indirect ralliers"), while 11 went directly from their units to an ARVN post or Chieu Hoi center. For cadres, the proportion is similar: Of 11 ralliers, 6 came in directly. Hardships and fear of death in combat were the principal reasons cited by soldiers who deserted their units; these were the factors mentioned by 6 of 13 indirect ralliers as well as by 7 of 11 direct ralliers. Cadres, without any obvious distinction as to "directness," seem to have rallied primarily for another reason: 6 of the 11 decided to escape because of a personal grievance (e.g., failure to obtain a promotion; denial of permission to visit the family at a critical time).

Some highly tenuous and tentative conclusions may be derived from the analysis of our sample. First, ordinary

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<sup>21</sup>An assistant squad leader who rallied in mid-1966 stated that, whenever a cadre died in battle, the troops were never permitted to know of the death, to know the time or place of the burial, or to attend the funeral. When a high-ranking cadre was killed, his family was not informed until six months after his death.

soldiers of the three battalions were motivated to escape primarily because of suffering and fear of further hardships. About as many of them went home right after escaping as turned themselves in to the GVN. The decisive factor for those who went first to their villages may have been (although only five so indicated) that they were then persuaded by trustworthy friends or relatives of the credibility of GVN promises of good treatment. The importance of contacting the families of Viet Cong personnel cannot be overstressed; for they are in the best position to convince soldiers of the falsity of VC warnings.

Second, most cadre ralliers, regardless of why they chose to defect, emphasized that comrades still in the RF units believed (as they themselves had done a short time before) that the main obstacle to defection was a lack of available alternatives. One captured hard-core Party member and acting company commander had allowed himself to think about deserting. "Where would I go?" he asked himself. "I had been working for the revolution and would be considered as an undesirable element by the Nationalists. I couldn't just leave the Front and go home." An assistant squad leader who eventually did rally made the same point: "After I joined the Front there was nothing else I could do but go through with it. Once you sit on the back of a tiger you have to ride it." Cadres of the RF battalions, believing, as ranking Front members, that they had forfeited any chance of forgiveness by the GVN, found the break far more difficult to make than the privates. When they did make

it, they were most often motivated, not by ideological alienation, unbearable hardships, or Chieu Hoi appeals, but by personal resentment toward a superior officer or Front agency.



IX. PSYWAR OPPORTUNITIES IN THE DELTA

Despite the overall impression conveyed here of continued cohesion in the ranks of the three battalions, a number of important weaknesses had manifested themselves by late 1966. RF cadres, however disturbed by the falling morale of their men and the unlikelihood of imminent victory, remained basically ready to fight on. The soldiers, however, became less willing to accept the risks of continued loyalty to the VC when and where they began to believe in the existence of workable alternatives to the hardships of service with the VC. With the introduction of U.S. units into the delta by January 1967, the situation in the three battalions may have become more critical, not only from the soldiers' weakening dedication, but also from the villagers' increasing reluctance to support them. This concluding section suggests some vulnerabilities, revealed by our interviewees, that seem most amenable to U.S.-GVN psychological warfare.

At a district reorientation session for delta units in 1965, according to a member of a Dinh Tuong district Youth Group Chapter Committee, the following slogan was put forward: "Seize the opportunity, move ahead quickly, concentrate military forces, rise up and seize power in the rural areas and create a turning point in the advance toward the general counteroffensive and the general insurrection." This was not the first time the Front had referred to its long-range goal of a "general counter-offensive and general insurrection" (or "uprising"); but, like the Viet Minh before it, the Front has had to alter

its timetable as the "turning point" consistently proved unattainable. Most former members of the three battalions were fully aware of the Front's inability to accomplish its military aims. Several implied that the call for a general counteroffensive had been heard so often and still seemed so far away that they no longer considered it realistic. This attitude is reflected in the fact that 11 of 17 soldiers and 9 of 12 cadres who offered opinions on the course of the war<sup>22</sup> would not predict which side would win. Frequently, in spite of a conclusion that one side (almost always the GVN) was stronger, our respondents came up with such comments as, "the army with the people's support will win," "both sides are strong, it is impossible to tell," "the war is not going to be decided quickly," and "the GVN is improving all-'round but the Front still controls the people."

The general uncertainty about the war registered or implied by many former RF soldiers and cadres probably stemmed also from the stalemate in the delta during 1965 and 1966. Coupled with the VC's failure to put through their counteroffensive plans, the sit-tight posture of the delta units may have disposed desertion-minded soldiers and cadres to heed Chieu Hoi appeals attuned to frustration over the prospects of a long war. Attention might be called to the Front's consistent inability either to make good on its boasts of imminent success or to fulfill its annual predictions of impressive strides forward in

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<sup>22</sup>The 29 responses, of course, were spread over time, but when the whole period is divided the number per sub-period is too small to be significant.

the fighting. We should indicate our awareness of the changing strategic perspective that has led the Front to talk of a "limited" instead of a "special" war. We should point out to soldiers and cadres that this change means a longer and more destructive war. We might ask the VC soldiers: Is it really worth while to serve in an army that has been deceiving its troops and that cannot regain the initiative?

Civilian concern over the prospect of a long war should be exploited by appeals to villagers in VC-held areas. Statements by both soldiers and VC civilian cadres indicate that villagers have become profoundly distressed at the VC's failures. Any benefits they might once have expected for supporting the Front have lost their appeal in the face of growing war damage. As a Dinh Tuong village cadre, who rallied late in 1966, phrased it:

I certainly am not flattering the GVN with what I am going to say, but the truth is that the majority of the people living in there [Ap Thoi village] think that the GVN will win this war. The main reason for this opinion comes from the Front propaganda itself. They have always boasted that they were going to carry out the General Offensive and the General Insurrection, that they had scored victory after victory, but here, in Dinh Tuong Province, the people have never witnessed any of their victories. The only thing the people have ever grasped is the increase of shellings and also the increase of their hardships. As a result, they are thinking the Front just lies and that it would never be able to defeat the GVN.

Even making allowances for some exaggeration, the cadre's testimony seems to contain a kernel of truth. The

villagers have grown tired of the war and of the VC units which, they believe, have shared a major responsibility for its destructiveness. In directing leaflets and broadcasts at the villagers, we should try to call their attention to the probability of protracted warfare, increased VC demands on the villagers, and further diminution of VC benefits to all villagers, including those with sons in the Front. We might stress that the Front has had its chance to show what it could do for them and, far from improving their livelihood, has further impoverished the people.

Other frustrations of the delta war seem to invite psywar attention. There is considerable evidence that, by late 1966, soldiers and cadres had become disheartened by word that their families had not received promised benefits in return for their relatives' service in the Front. On the contrary, families with sons in the front lines were required to pay as much if not more in troop-support "contributions" as those without relatives in the service. Reports of corruption on the part of VC village cadres were also voiced. While we encourage villagers to contact their sons in the army regarding their grievances, we should also urge soldiers and cadres to find out more about how the Front has fulfilled the promises it made when they joined and, on the basis of that investigation, to reconsider the usefulness of their commitment.

The appeal of the Chieu Hoi program might be enhanced by drawing attention to the Front's policy of upgrading units and transferring soldiers from the delta to more dangerous fighting zones. Soldiers in particular should

be alerted to the fact that the Front has suffered heavily in II and III Corps during 1966 and is becoming desperate for manpower in those sectors. It may not be long before it becomes their turn to move from the relative quiet of the delta either to a main-force battalion (in the case of a provincial unit) or to the thick of the fighting with a II or III Corps unit. A few of the cadres in our sample, who rallied because of personal grievances, timed their departures to forestall more dangerous assignments.

Even the most telling of the appeals mentioned above, of course, can hardly be expected to do more than confirm an existing impression or reinforce an existing disposition. They are not likely to provide the impetus for immediate desertion or defection. For those in the VC who are pondering desertion or defection, the "credibility gap" must be narrowed: On the one hand, the VC's warnings of GVN retaliation in the form of torture and execution must be firmly disavowed; on the other, the GVN must explicitly state its willingness to treat the cooperative defector as a full citizen immune from punishment for having temporarily traveled down "the wrong path."

Soldiers of the three battalions demanded no more than an assurance they could resume their normal lives; that demand should be squarely met, not only in practice but also in leaflets and broadcasts. Many soldier ralliers initially deserted to their homes. Only when their suspicions regarding ultimate GVN intentions toward them were laid to rest did they take the further step of rallying to the GVN cause. To hasten this process, appeals to villagers could include a statement of GVN intentions and safe-conduct passes for transmission to sons in the VC.

Finally, every effort should be made to substantiate the contents of leaflets and broadcasts to particular units with the words, signatures, voices, VC codes, and other identifying marks of former members of those units who have defected.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

ASPECTS OF THE BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE  
VC REGULAR FORCE (DELTA) TROOPS -- ORD

1	2	3	4	5*	6	7	8	9*	10	11	12
Subject Number	Bn Unit	VC Econ. Status	Educ. (Yrs.)	Nature of Joining	Date Joined	Service in Front (months)	Service in RF (months)	Training Period (weeks)	Type Training	Rank	Detention Status
S-1	261	Poor	3	Vol	8/63	24	12	---	---	Pvt	Rally
S-2	261	Mid	1	Dft-X	10/63	12	5	X	---	Pvt	Rally
S-3	261	Poor	2	Vol	3/63	14	14	---	---	Pvt	Rally
S-4	261	---	Lit.	Dft-X	9/63	7	7	4	Mil/Pol	Pvt	Rally
S-5	261	Poor	5	Vol	11/63	15	15	---	---	Cell ldr	Rally
S-6	261	Poor	4	Dft-F	12/64	8	2	24	---	Pvt	Rally
S-7	261	Poor	2	Dft-F	6/65	2	2	X	---	Pvt	Rally
S-8	261	Poor	4	Dft-F	4/64	20	1	X	---	Pvt	Rally
S-9	263	Poor	3	Vol	7/63	16	12	14	Mil/pol/cult	Pvt	Rally
S-10	263	Poor	2	Dft-F	2/65	7	1	20	Mil/cult	Pvt	Rally
S-11	263	Poor	Lit	Dft-X	10/64	9	7	8	Mil/pol	Pvt	Rally
S-12	263	Poor	2	Dft-F	2/65	10	8	8	Mil	Pvt	Rally
S-13	263	Poor	5	Dft-X	2/66	5	2	X	---	Pvt	Rally
S-14	263	Poor	Lit	---	11/63	24	7	---	---	Pvt	Rally
S-15	514	Mid	3	Vol	7/63	2	2	XM	---	Pvt	Rally
S-16	514	Poor	2	Vol	5/64	9	8	2	Mil/pol	Pvt	Rally
S-17	514	Poor	3	Vol	7/61	24	4	None	---	Medic	Rally
S-18	514	Poor	2	Vol	4/60	61	4	1	Mil/pol	Pvt	Rally
S-19	514	Mid	3	Dft-F	2/63	20	19	XM	Mil/pol/cult	Cell ldr	Rally
S-20	514	Land	6	Dft-F	5/65	2	2	---	---	Pvt	Rally
S-21	514	Poor	3	Dft-F	6/65	6	2	16	Mil/pol	Pvt	Rally
S-22	514	VPoor	Illit.	---	2/63	24(?)	---	9	Mil/pol	Cell ldr	Rally
S-23	514	Poor	Illit.	Dft-F	2/61	60	9	XM	Mil/pol	Cell ldr	Pris.
S-24	514	Poor	Lit	Vol	3/63	24	2	---	---	Cell ldr	Pris.
S-25	514	VPoor	2	Dft-F	1/65	9	1	XM	---	Pvt	Rally
S-26	514	Poor	2	Vol	3/59	74	13	---	---	Cell ldr	Rally

## \*Explanations of Col. No.

(5) Vol = Voluntarily; Dft-X = drafted without complaint;  
Dft-F = drafted under force or threat of use of force.

(9) XM = trained while unit on move; X = was trained, but period unknown.

(13-15) CA = cannot answer (incapable of knowing); U = uncertain;  
UND = undecided, since both sides equally strong or have strong points.

(19) 1 = hardships of army life; 2 = fear of belief in VC aims, promises; 4 = GVN prop  
6 = personal grievance against VC command  
benefits; 8 = required GVN papers to work

Table 2

ASPECTS OF THE BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE  
VC REGULAR FORCE (DELTA) TROOPS --

1	2	3	4	5*	6	7	8	9*	10	11	12
Subject Number	Bn Unit	VC Econ. Status	Educ. (Yrs.)	Nature of Joining	Date Joined	Service in Front (months)	Service in MF (months)	Training Period (weeks)	Type Training	Rank	Detention Status
C-1	261	Mid	2	Vol	6/61	46	40+	2	Pol	SL	Pris.
C-2	261	VPoor	Lit	Dft-X	2/60	54	54	XM	Mil	SL	Rally
C-3	261	VPoor	Lit	Vol	2/54	60+	60+	---	---	PL	Rally
C-4	261	Poor	1	Vol	8/64	14	8	---	---	ASL	Rally
C-5	261	Poor	5	Vol	2/62	36	30+	---	---	SL	Rally
C-6	263	Poor	3	Vol	2/64	12+	10+	---	---	SL	Rally
C-7	514	Poor	3	Vol	3/60	77	29	8	Mil	PL	Pris.
C-8	514	Mid	5	Dft-F	8/64	14	7	2/XM	Pol/Mil	ASL	Rally
C-9	514	Mid	5	Dft-X	7/64	19	5	2	Mil	SL	Rally
C-10	514	Mid	11	Vol	3/64	14	13	4	Pol	PL	Rally
C-11	514	Mid	2	Vol	2/60	76	46	---	---	ASL	Rally
C-12	514	---	5	Vol	9/62	49	31	7	Mil/Pol	PL	Rally
C-13	514	Poor	Lit	---	10/61	60	5	---	---	PL	Rally

\*Explanations: See Table 1



Table 1

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F THE BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE OF FORMER  
FORCE (DELTA) TROOPS -- ORDINARY SOLDIERS

	11	12	13*	14*	15*	16	17	18	19*
sg	Rank	Detention Status	Who will win war?	When will war end?	Stronger side	Party Status	Nature of Rally	Date of Rally/Capture	Reason for Rally
	Pvt	Rally	---	---	---	Non-P.	INDIR.	10/64	1,2,3
	Pvt	Rally	---	---	CA	Non-P.	DIRECT	?/64	2
	Pvt	Rally	---	---	---	Non-P.	INDIR.	12/64	2
Pol	Pvt	Rally	---	---	---	Non-P.	INDIR.	1/65	2
	Cell ldr	Rally	---	---	---	Non-P.	INDIR.	2/65	3
	Pvt	Rally	---	---	GVN	Non-P.	INDIR.	7/65	2,3
	Pvt	Rally	---	---	GVN	Non-P.	DIRECT	7/65	3
	Pvt	Rally	GVN	---	GVN	Non-P.	INDIR.	12/65	5
ult	Pvt	Rally	CA	---	GVN	Non-P.	DIRECT	11/64	1,2
cult	Pvt	Rally	GVN	U	GVN	Non-P.	DIRECT	8/65	3
pol	Pvt	Rally	GVN	---	GVN	L. Youth	DIRECT	7/65	1
	Pvt	Rally	CA	---	GVN	Non-P.	DIRECT	12/65	1
	Pvt	Rally	GVN	U	GVN	Non-P.	INDIR.	7/66	5
	Pvt	Rally	UND	CA	UND	Non-P.	INDIR.	10/66	6
pol	Pvt	Rally	UND	U	---	Non-P.	DIRECT	9/63	1
	Pvt	Rally	UND	---	GVN	Non-P.	DIRECT	2/65	3,4
	Medic	Rally	UND	---	UND	Non-P.	INDIR.	5/65	7
pol	Pvt	Rally	UND	U	UND	Non-P.	INDIR.	6/65	1
ult	Cell ldr	Rally	GVN	---	GVN	Non-P.	INDIR.	6/65	2,4
	Pvt	Rally	UND	---	GVN	Non-P.	DIRECT	7/65	2
pol	Pvt	Rally	---	---	GVN	Non-P.	DIRECT	12/65	5
pol	Cell ldr	Rally	GVN	---	GVN	L. Youth	DIRECT	1/66	1,4
pol	Cell ldr	Pris.	UND	---	UND	Non-P.	---	7/65	---
	Cell ldr	Pris.	CA	---	CA	Party	---	3/65	---
	Pvt	Rally	UND	---	---	Non-P.	INDIR.	9/65	8
	Cell ldr	Rally	---	---	---	Non-P.	INDIR.	6/65	3,5

1 = loss of army life; 2 = fear of death or combat; 3 = loss of  
aims, promises; 4 = GVN propaganda; 5 = urging of family;  
1 = grievance against VC command; 7 = lack of further personal  
= required GVN papers to work.

Table 2

OF THE BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE OF FORMER  
REGULAR FORCE (DELTA) TROOPS -- CADRES

	11	12	13*	14*	15*	16	17	18	19*
sg	Rank	Detention Status	Who will win war?	When will war end?	Stronger side	Party Status	Nature of Rally	Date of Rally/Capture	Reason for Rally
	SL	Pris.	VC	F	VC	---	---	4/65	---
	SL	Rally	UND	---	GVN	---	INDIR.	?/65	1,2,5
	PL	Rally	GVN	---	GVN	Non-P	DIRECT	11/65	6,7
	ASL	Rally	UND	CA	UND	Party	DIRECT	10/65	1,3
	SL	Rally	UND	---	GVN	Party	INDIR.	9/65	3
	SL	Rally	CA	CA	UND	---	DIRECT	12/65	---
	PL	Pris.	VC	CA	VC	Party	---	8/66	---
#11	ASL	Rally	UND	---	UND	Party	DIRECT	10/65	1,3
	SL	Rally	UND	---	UND	L. Youth	INDIR.	2/66	6
	PL	Rally	CA	---	UND	Non-P.	INDIR.	12/65	6
	ASL	Rally	UND	CA	UND	L. Youth	DIRECT	6/66	6
Pol	PL	Rally	---	---	---	---	DIRECT	10/66	6,7
	PL	Rally	UND	CA	UND	L. Youth	INDIR.	10/66	6